Critique as Commodity: The Dialectic of Value and Form in Prestige Television

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***Abstract*—This paper advances a unified dialectical analysis of the prestige television phenomenon, focusing on Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*. It argues that prestige television represents the first cultural form in which the critique of the capitalist value-form becomes itself a primary source of value production. The paper rejects the separation of immanent aesthetic critique from the analysis of industrial conditions, instead demonstrating that the two are moments of a single dialectical movement. Drawing on Wertkritik (value-critique), Hegelian dialectics, and an updated Kracauerian method of surface-level analysis, the paper shows how the formal features that make these series incisive critiques of the automatic subject of capital—slowness, opacity, moral ambiguity, and a dense symbolic lore—are the very same features that make them valuable commodities in the matrix-era attention economy. The paper traces this contradiction through the narrative and symbolic content of the series, the industrial logic of cable and streaming platforms, and the ambivalent figure of the showrunner-auteur. It further engages with Jungian and Deleuzo-Guattarian frameworks to account for the collective unconscious resonance that transforms critical content into popular phenomenon. The paper concludes by acknowledging the limits of capture, identifying residual lines of flight that prevent the system's total closure, and proposing a renewed Kracauerian critical practice that reads works, industries, and spectatorship as a single expressive surface. The aim is not merely to interpret these cultural artifacts but to perform, through the dialectical structure of the argument, the very entanglement of critique and commodification that defines the Spirit of late capitalism.**

***Index Terms*—Wertkritik, Kracauer, Hegel, Prestige Television, Attention Economy, Showrunner, Mass Ornament, Value-Form, Dialectics, Collective Unconscious.**

I. The Problem: The Paradox of Popular Critique and the Limits of Adornian Orthodoxy

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, American television produced a series of works that seemed to defy the long-standing assumption that genuine cultural critique and mass commercial success are incompatible. Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013) and its prequel-sequel *Better Call Saul* (2015–2022) garnered unprecedented critical acclaim, a devoted global fanbase, and a secure place in the canon of "prestige" television. More strikingly, they did so while offering a vision of American life that is unrelentingly bleak: a world in which the healthcare system compels a mild-mannered chemistry teacher to become a drug lord, in which the legal system is a rigged game that punishes sincerity and rewards cynical manipulation, and in which every attempt at human connection is eventually subordinated to the cold logic of profit and survival.

This presents a paradox. In an era of what Mark Fisher has termed "capitalist realism"—the pervasive sense that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism—how do works that are so deeply critical of the capitalist social order achieve such massive popularity [11]? Why do these series *feel* more genuinely critical than the vast majority of explicitly political media, which so often comes across as preachy, didactic, or, worse, as a form of "woke-washing" that reinforces the status quo? And what does their success reveal about the nature of cultural production in late capitalism?

A. The Dominant Paradigm: Adorno, the Culture Industry, and Its French Legacies

To answer these questions, we must first confront the dominant paradigm within which critical analyses of popular culture have been conducted for nearly a century. In the French intellectual context, and more broadly within the tradition of Western Marxism, critical approaches to television and mass media have long been shaped by the legacy of Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's concept of the "culture industry" (*Kulturindustrie*), as articulated in their seminal work *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [**?**]. This framework, powerfully elaborated in Adorno's essays on television, popular music, and the "regression of listening," posits that the products of the culture industry are fundamentally instruments of domination. They operate through standardization, pseudo-individualization, and the relentless reproduction of the same, serving to pacify the masses, liquidate the individual subject, and foreclose the possibility of genuine critical thought. The culture industry, in this view, is not a neutral sphere of entertainment but a key apparatus for the reproduction of capitalist social relations, integrating consumers into the very system that exploits them [**?**].

This Adornian lineage has profoundly shaped French critical theory, from the Situationist critique of the "spectacle" by Guy Debord [7] to more contemporary analyses of media and commodification. The strength of this tradition lies in its unflinching recognition of the totalizing logic of capital and its capacity to absorb and neutralize even the most ostensibly oppositional cultural forms. It provides an indispensable warning against any naive celebration of popular culture as a site of spontaneous resistance. To read a television series through an Adornian lens is to be perpetually vigilant against the ways in which its formal conventions, its narrative structures, and

its very mode of address work to reinforce the status quo, even—or especially—when it appears to be offering a critique.

Yet, when confronted with a phenomenon like the prestige television of Vince Gilligan, the Adornian framework encounters a series of intractable difficulties. These difficulties are not merely empirical; they are structural and methodological. They stem from the framework's inability to account for two crucial dimensions of the contemporary cultural landscape: the *performative relation of the work to the real* and the *dialectical movement of the collective unconscious within the production process itself*, understood in a rigorous historico-materialist, and not merely ideo-psychological, sense.

1. The Failure of Performative Dialectics. The Adornian model tends to read cultural artifacts as *reflections* or *expressions* of an underlying social reality. The work of art, in this view, is a symptom to be decoded by the critical theorist, who stands outside it and reveals its hidden truth. This is a fundamentally *contemplative* model of critique. It does not account for the way in which a work like *Breaking Bad* does not merely *reflect* the logic of the value-form but actively *performs* it, making it viscerally sensible and thereby altering the viewer's relationship to it. The series does not just describe the domination of abstract time; it makes the viewer *feel* the weight of the deadline in their own body. It does not just critique the fetishism of the commodity; it presents the blue meth as an object of hypnotic, almost religious fascination. The critique is not external to the work; it is *immanent* to its form. The Adornian framework, with its commitment to a negative dialectics that preserves the gap between concept and object, struggles to theorize this performative, world-disclosing dimension of the aesthetic. It can diagnose the work as a commodity, but it cannot easily explain how the work's very commodity-form can become the vehicle for a critique of the value-form.

2. The Absence of the Collective Unconscious in Production. The second major limitation of the Adornian model is its treatment of the collective psyche. For Adorno, the unconscious is primarily a site of manipulation. The culture industry plants its standardized products directly into the receptive, passive minds of consumers. There is little room for a genuinely *productive* unconscious, a collective reservoir of desires, anxieties, and archetypal images that is not simply implanted by the system but arises from the historically specific contradictions of social life. Even when Adorno and his collaborators, in works like *The Authoritarian Personality*, engage with psychoanalytic categories, the emphasis remains on the *susceptibility* of the individual to fascist and capitalist propaganda. The unconscious is a target, not a source [**?**].

This framework is ill-equipped to explain the *phenomenal* success of *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*. Why did millions of viewers, across the globe, feel such a profound connection to these bleak, difficult, and morally ambiguous works? An Adornian reading might point to the series' clever marketing, its status as a "prestige" commodity, or the way it flatters the viewer's sense of intellectual superiority. These are not wrong, but they are radically insufficient. They fail to account for the specific *intensity* of the viewer's engagement, the sense that the series is speaking a truth that is rarely articulated in mainstream culture. This intensity can only be understood by turning to frameworks that take the collective unconscious seriously as a *historico-materialist* force—as a site of production, and not merely reception, of the work's meaning.

B. The Central Claim: Critique as Commodity

This paper advances a novel thesis that cuts through the impasse of the Adornian framework. We argue that prestige television, as exemplified by the Gilligan universe, represents the first cultural form in which the *critique of the value-form becomes itself a primary source of value production*. This is not a simple matter of a subversive message being co-opted by the market after the fact. It is a structural, dialectical entanglement in which the very features that make the works incisive critiques of capital—their formal slowness, their narrative opacity, their moral ambiguity, and their dense symbolic systems—are the same features that make them valuable as commodities in the contemporary attention economy. Critique and commodification are not sequential; they are simultaneous and mutually constitutive.

To develop this claim, this paper mobilizes a threefold theoretical framework. First, it draws on the tradition of *Wertkritik* (value-critique), particularly the work of Moishe Postone, Robert Kurz, and Anselm Jappe, to identify the object of critique not as "neoliberalism" or "corporate greed" but as the *value-form* itself—the abstract, impersonal, and automatic logic that subordinates all human activity to the imperative of endless accumulation [**?**], [1]. Second, it employs a Hegelian dialectical method to trace the movement of this logic through the narrative, formal, and symbolic dimensions of the series, showing how the works *perform* the Aufhebung of the value-form even as they remain trapped within it. Third, and most crucially, it updates the methodological legacy of Siegfried Kracauer for the age of the attention economy.

C. The Kracauerian Alternative: Surface, Symptom, and the Industrial Unconscious

To overcome the limitations of the Adornian model without abandoning the project of a rigorous materialist critique, this paper turns to the work of Siegfried Kracauer. A contemporary and sometime interlocutor of Adorno, Kracauer developed a distinct approach to the analysis of popular culture. Where Adorno tended to view the products of the culture industry from the standpoint of their totalizing, reifying logic, Kracauer was fascinated by their *surfaces*. He read the ephemeral, seemingly trivial phenomena of mass culture—the Tiller Girls' dance routines, the architecture of cinema lobbies, the plots of forgotten films—as "surface-level expressions" (*Oberflächenäußerungen*) of the collective unconscious. For Kracauer, these surfaces are not mere reflections of an economic base. They are *symptoms*, unconscious disclosures of the deep-seated anxieties, desires, and contradictions that structure a given historical epoch [3], [4].

This paper radically updates Kracauer's method for the twenty-first century. We extend the category of the "surface" to include not only the aesthetic content of the works (their narrative, formal, and symbolic dimensions) but also the *industrial conditions of their production and reception*. The business model of the cable network, the logic of the streaming platform, the marketing of the showrunner-auteur, the very structure of serialized, on-demand viewing—these are not external, sociological factors. They are themselves *expressive surfaces*, materializations of the same collective Spirit that the works themselves articulate. The mass ornament of our time is not a dance troupe; it is the synchronized, distributed, and valorized attention of millions of viewers engaged in the collective interpretation of a prestige drama.

Furthermore, to account for the resonance of these surfaces with the collective psyche, the paper draws on the archetypal psychology of C.G. Jung and the schizoanalysis of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Jung's concept of archetypes provides a vocabulary for the deep, transhistorical structures of the unconscious that are activated by the specific contradictions of late capitalism [8]. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "desiring-production" provides a materialist account of the unconscious as a factory, not a theater—a site where the flows of desire are territorialized, captured, and put to work by the capitalist machine, but where lines of flight also emerge [9]. The success of the Gilligan universe, on this reading, is not a matter of ideological manipulation but of *resonance*. The series functions as a collective assemblage of enunciation, a site where the frustrated, territorialized desires of late-capitalist subjects find a temporary, partial, and deeply ambivalent expression.

By reading these multiple surfaces—the work, the industry, and the spectatorship—as a single, unified, dialectical formation, the Kracauerian method allows us to grasp the central paradox of the Gilligan universe. It shows how the immanent critique of the value-form and the industrial logic of valorization are not external to one another but are moments of a single, contradictory process. The critique is not neutralized by the commodity form; it is *produced by it*, and in turn, it *valorizes* it. This is a dialectic that the Adornian model, with its stark opposition between authentic art and the culture industry, cannot fully capture.

D. Structure of the Argument

The paper proceeds in a dialectical arc of eight movements. Section II provides an immanent analysis of the Gilligan universe, demonstrating how the aesthetic logic of the series already encodes the structure of the value-form. Section III introduces a necessary break, arguing that immanent critique alone cannot account for the phenomenon of popularity; it turns to Jungian and Deleuzo-Guattarian frameworks to account for the collective unconscious resonance of the works. Section IV updates Kracauer's method for the matrix-era attention economy, analyzing the industrial surface of prestige television as a new form of the mass ornament. Section V articulates the central dialectic: the features that make the shows critical are the features that make them valuable commodities. Section VI examines the ambivalent figure of the showrunner-auteur as the tragic embodiment of this contradiction. Section VII acknowledges the limits of capture, identifying residual lines of flight that prevent total closure. Section VIII concludes by proposing a renewed Kracauerian critical practice that reads works, industries, and spectatorship as a single expressive surface. The aim is not merely to interpret these cultural artifacts but to perform, through the dialectical structure of the argument itself, the very entanglement of critique and commodification that defines the Spirit of late capitalism.

II. The Immanent Layer: The Aesthetic Logic of the Value-Form

Before turning to the conditions of production, it is necessary to establish the precise nature of the critique that the Gilligan universe performs. This section argues that the series do not merely depict the consequences of a flawed economic system; they *encode the very logic of the value-form* into their narrative structures, formal techniques, and symbolic systems. They are, in this sense, works of immanent critique: they use the materials of the culture industry to expose the irrational rationality of the automatic subject.

A. Walter White as a Function of Value

The transformation of Walter White from mild-mannered high school chemistry teacher to ruthless drug lord Heisenberg is not, at its root, a story about individual moral failure. It is a story about a man becoming a *function* of capital. The initial catalyst is not greed or ambition in the abstract; it is the actuarial logic of the American healthcare system. Faced with a terminal cancer diagnosis and the prospect of leaving his family in debt, Walt makes a calculation. He possesses a scarce and valuable skill—the ability to produce extremely pure methamphetamine. The market, in its infinite wisdom, has assigned a high exchange-value to this skill. His decision to "break bad" is, in this sense, a perfectly rational economic choice. He is simply responding to the incentives that the system has placed before him.

Yet once he enters the meth trade, the logic of valorization escapes his control. He is no longer an autonomous agent pursuing a finite goal (a specific sum of money for his family). He becomes a *Träger*—a bearer—of the capital relation. The imperative of $M \rightarrow C \rightarrow M'$ (money-commodity-money) takes over. Each successful batch of meth creates the necessity for the next. Each threat to the enterprise must be eliminated, not out of personal malice, but out of systemic necessity. Walt's famous declaration—"I am the one who knocks"—is the cry of a subject who has fully identified with the automatic subject, who believes himself to be the master when he is, in fact, the most thoroughly enslaved. He has become the personification of the value-form, and his eventual destruction is the logical outcome of this identification.

This reading is reinforced by the character of Gustavo Fring, who represents the perfected, ascetic form of the capitalist. Gus has no personal life, no visible pleasures, no attachments

that are not subordinated to the efficient functioning of his logistics network. He is the manager of capital, the high priest of the abstract value that flows through his superlab and his distribution channels. His death, in a fiery explosion triggered by his own desire for personal revenge against Hector Salamanca, is the only moment in which the personal breaks through the impersonal. It is also the moment of his destruction. The system does not need Gus; the system needs only the process. And the process continues, in the form of Declan's operation and then Jack Welker's gang, after he is gone.

B. Temporal Domination: The Clock and the Deadline

One of the most pervasive and yet often overlooked dimensions of the Gilligan universe is its treatment of time. The series are saturated with the pressure of the deadline. Walt's cancer diagnosis gives him a statistical life expectancy—a quantified, abstract future that he must race against. Gus's operation runs on strict delivery schedules, enforced by the terrifyingly anxious Lydia Rodarte-Quayle. Mike Ehrmantraut's work as a "cleaner" and enforcer is governed by the clock: the time it takes to dispose of a body, the window of opportunity before the police arrive. Jesse, in the final season of *Breaking Bad*, is enslaved in a meth lab, his days reduced to a brutal cycle of production and captivity.

This is not natural, cyclical time. It is the *abstract time* of the capitalist production process, as theorized by Moishe Postone. Abstract time is uniform, continuous, and empty. It is the measure of value. The worker's time is not his own; it is a quantity to be extracted, managed, and valorized. The Gilligan universe makes this abstract temporality viscerally *felt*. The viewer experiences the anxiety of the countdown, the claustrophobia of the schedule, the horror of running out of time not to live, but to *produce*. The episode "Fly" is a masterclass in this temporal logic. Confined to the superlab for an entire episode, Walt and Jesse are trapped in a space where the only measure of time is the progress of the cook. The fly, a tiny, organic intrusion, becomes the focal point for Walt's anxiety about contamination—contamination of the product, contamination of his soul, contamination of the pristine, abstract time of production by the messiness of the living world.

C. Formal Features: Slowness, Repetition, and the Laboring Body

The critical force of the Gilligan universe is not confined to its narrative content. It is embedded in its formal strategies. The series are notable for their deliberate, often agonizingly slow pace. They dwell on mundane activities: filling out legal paperwork, cleaning equipment, waiting in lobbies, driving through the endless desert. These are not sequences designed to advance the plot. They are designed to make the viewer *inhabit* the weight of duration under capitalism.

This formal slowness is a direct challenge to the accelerated temporality of the spectacle, as theorized by Guy Debord [7]. The culture industry, in its dominant forms, operates through constant stimulation, rapid cuts, and the promise of immediate gratification. It fragments attention and short-circuits the capacity for sustained, critical thought. The Gilligan universe, by contrast, demands a different kind of spectatorship. It asks the viewer to sit with discomfort, to endure long takes and silent stretches, to engage in the kind of patient, hermeneutic labor that is the opposite of passive consumption. This is a *formal resistance* to the logic of the commodity.

This resistance is further expressed in the series' attention to the *gestures of labor*. The camera lingers on hands: mixing chemicals, sorting files, cleaning the fry station at Los Pollos Hermanos, tucking a dollar bill into a vending machine. These are not montage sequences meant to compress time. They are extended, almost documentary-like observations of the body engaged in repetitive, skilled, but ultimately alienated work. By making these gestures visible, the series refuses the spectacle's erasure of labor. It shows us the concrete, sensuous activity that underlies the abstract value-form. It reminds us that behind every commodity, behind every dollar, there is a human body performing a task.

D. The Symbolic Lore: A Conceptual Lexicon of the Value-Form

Beyond narrative and form, the Gilligan universe has generated a dense system of recurring objects and motifs—what fan communities call "lore." These elements are not merely decorative; they function as *conceptual hieroglyphs* that materialize the abstractions of Wertkritik.

- **The Blue Meth:** The pure, crystalline product of Walt's labor is the perfect fetish commodity. It is desirable not only for its use-value (its potency) but for its exchange-value and its sign-value. It is a status symbol, a brand. Its mesmerizing blue color is the color of value itself, made visible. Walt's reverence for his product is the attitude of the alienated producer who sees his own labor-power reflected back at him as an independent, magical object.
- **The Salamanca Bell:** Hector Salamanca's bell, his only means of communication after his stroke, is the reified voice of pre-capitalist patriarchy. The Salamancas operate according to a code of blood and personal vengeance that belongs to an earlier epoch. The bell is the last, desperate assertion of this form of power in a world increasingly dominated by Gus Fring's impersonal, bureaucratic rationality.
- **The Zafiro Añejo Stopper:** The ornate stopper from a bottle of expensive tequila, kept by Kim Wexler as a memento of a shared scam, is a token of lost use-value. It is an object cherished not for its exchange-value but for the memories and intimacy it evokes. Its reappearance throughout *Better Call Saul* is a haunting reminder of a world of genuine human connection that the value-form has destroyed.
- **The Inflatable Statue of Liberty:** Perched atop Saul Goodman's strip-mall office, this kitschy decoration is a mockery of the American Dream. It is a blow-up doll of an ideal: hollow, easily deflated, and fundamentally

ridiculous. It promises liberty, but the liberty it offers is the "liberty" of the market—the freedom to be exploited, to be cheated, and to be ground down by the very legal system that Saul manipulates.

- **The Vacuum Cleaner Shop:** Ed Galbraith's unassuming storefront is the portal to social death. To enter it is to agree to cease to exist as a legible subject of the capitalist state. The "new life" Ed provides is a life stripped of all social wealth, a life of pure, precarious biological survival. It is the ultimate proof that, under the value-form, there is no outside except non-existence.
- **The Superlab:** Hidden beneath an industrial laundry, Gus Fring's superlab is a cathedral of abstract labor. It is a sterile, gleaming, and totally administered space, consecrated to the pure production of value. Walt's pride in this space is the most profound expression of his alienation: he loves the lab not because it serves him, but because he serves it.

Taken together, the narrative, formal, and symbolic dimensions of the Gilligan universe constitute a powerful immanent critique of the value-form. The series show us, with painful clarity, the logic of the automatic subject and the destruction it leaves in its wake. Yet, as the next section will argue, this immanent analysis cannot, by itself, explain the phenomenon of the series' popularity. To understand why these works resonated so deeply with a mass audience, we must turn to the level of the collective unconscious and the conditions of production.

III. The Break: Why Immanent Critique Is Not Enough

The analysis presented in Section II is necessary, but it is not sufficient. It establishes that *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul* are works of profound critical insight. But it does not explain why they became *phenomena*. The history of culture is littered with works of radical critique that languished in obscurity, appreciated only by a small coterie of initiates. Why did these particular series, with their unrelenting bleakness and their demand for sustained, uncomfortable attention, capture the imagination of millions?

The answer, this paper contends, lies in a dimension that immanent analysis cannot access: the dimension of the *collective unconscious* and the *industrial surface*. Critique alone does not generate popularity. The works must also function as a *symptom*—a surface-level expression of deep, widely shared, but often unarticulated anxieties, desires, and frustrations. They must, in the terms of C.G. Jung, speak the language of the archetypes, tapping into the primordial images and narratives that structure the collective psyche [8]. And they must, in the terms of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, function as an *agencement collectif d'énonciation* (collective assemblage of enunciation), a site where the flows of desire that are normally channeled and contained by the capitalist machine find a temporary, partial, and ambivalent expression [9].

A. The Jungian Dimension: Archetypes and the Collective Shadow

From a Jungian perspective, the power of the Gilligan universe lies in its activation of deep archetypal structures. Walter White is not just a man; he is a figure of the *Shadow*. The Shadow, in Jungian psychology, is the repressed, unconscious, and often darker aspect of the personality. It contains all that the conscious ego refuses to acknowledge. Walt's journey is a dramatization of the Shadow's eruption into consciousness and its eventual possession of the entire personality. The viewer, watching Walt's descent, is not simply observing a fictional character. They are confronting their own Shadow—their own repressed capacity for rage, resentment, and the will to power. The series provides a safe, aesthetic space for this confrontation. It allows the collective Shadow to be *seen* and, to some extent, *integrated*.

The other characters, too, function as archetypal figures. Jesse Pinkman is the *Puer Aeternus*, the eternal boy, trapped in a state of emotional immaturity but possessing a core of genuine feeling that the adult world has crushed. Gus Fring is the *Senex*, the cold, calculating old man, the principle of order and control taken to its terrifying extreme. Mike Ehrmantraut is the *Senex* in its more benign, but still tragic, form: the competent, world-weary protector who knows the rules of the game but can no longer justify them. Saul Goodman is the *Trickster*, the boundary-crosser, the master of chaos and improvisation who exposes the hypocrisy of the established order.

The deep resonance of the series, on this reading, stems from their ability to give narrative form to these archetypal energies. They speak to a collective unconscious that is starved for genuine symbolic nourishment in a culture dominated by the superficial, commodified images of the spectacle. They are, in this sense, a form of modern myth-making.

B. The Deleuzo-Guattarian Dimension: Desire, Territorialization, and Lines of Flight

If Jung provides the vocabulary of the deep structures, Deleuze and Guattari provide the vocabulary of the dynamic flows. For them, desire is not a lack (as in the Freudian and Lacanian traditions) but a *productive, connective force*. Capitalism operates not by repressing desire but by *territorializing* it—by channeling its flows into the narrow, reified circuits of commodity consumption, wage labor, and the nuclear family. The subject of capitalism is a subject whose desire has been captured, coded, and put to work for the reproduction of the system.

The Gilligan universe, from this perspective, is a vast *territorial machine*. It maps the ways in which desire is captured and perverted by the value-form. Walt's desire for recognition and agency is channeled into the production of methamphetamine. Jimmy's desire for love and respect is channeled into the performance of Saul Goodman. Kim's desire for justice is channeled into a self-destructive spiral of transgression. The series show us, with excruciating detail, the process of territorialization.

But they also show us *lines of flight* (lignes de fuite). A line of flight is a movement of desire that escapes the territorializing logic of the system, that points toward a different way of being. Jesse's escape to Alaska in *El Camino* is the most prominent example. It is not a revolutionary act; it does not dismantle the system. But it is a *refusal*. It is a desire that says "no" to the game and walks away. Kim's withdrawal to Florida, her life of deliberate mediocrity, is another. Nacho Varga's sacrificial death to protect his father is a third—a line of flight that is also a line of death, but one that refuses the logic of the cartel. These moments of escape are what prevent the Gilligan universe from being a purely nihilistic, closed system. They are the residues, the fractures, the stubborn persistence of a desire that cannot be fully captured.

C. The Frustration and Rage of the Collective Unconscious

The final piece of the puzzle is the specific historical context. *Breaking Bad* premiered in 2008, on the eve of the global financial crisis. *Better Call Saul* concluded in 2022, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and amidst a widespread sense of institutional decay. These series did not emerge in a vacuum. They emerged at a moment when the promises of the neoliberal order—prosperity, stability, meritocracy—had been decisively broken. The collective unconscious of the American (and global) middle class was saturated with a diffuse but powerful rage: rage at a healthcare system that bankrupts the sick, at an economy that rewards speculation over labor, at a legal system that protects the powerful, and at a political class that seems utterly incapable of addressing any of it.

This rage is rarely given direct, articulate expression in mainstream culture. It is channeled into the safe, individualizing narratives of self-improvement, consumer choice, and partisan outrage. The Gilligan universe, by contrast, provides a *form* for this rage. It does not offer a political program or a clear villain to blame. Instead, it shows the *logic* of the system, the way it grinds down everyone who participates in it, from the high school teacher to the cartel boss. The viewer's frustration finds an aesthetic correlative in the slow, grinding temporality of the series, in the moral ambiguity that refuses easy answers, and in the symbolic lore that materializes the abstractions of capital. The shows do not tell the audience what to think; they make the audience *feel* the weight of the system. And in that feeling, the collective rage finds a momentary, precarious, and deeply ambivalent home.

This is the break. Immanent critique shows *what* the series say. The turn to the collective unconscious and the conditions of production shows *why* they were heard. The next section takes up this second task in earnest, turning to the industrial surface of prestige television.

IV. The Industrial Surface: The Matrix-Era Commodity

To understand why the Gilligan universe became a phenomenon, we must now descend from the heights of immanent critique and archetypal depth to the seemingly mundane, but in fact deeply symptomatic, level of the industrial conditions of production. This is the domain of the updated Kracauerian method: reading the business models, the technological platforms, and the labor processes of the culture industry as surface-level expressions of the collective Spirit.

A. Updating Kracauer: From the Mass Ornament to the Attention Economy

Siegfried Kracauer's method was to treat the ephemera of popular culture—the Tiller Girls' dance routines, the architecture of hotel lobbies, the plots of B-movies—as privileged sites for historical understanding. These phenomena, he argued, are not consciously designed as political allegories. They are *unconscious* disclosures. The synchronized, geometric patterns of the Tiller Girls, for example, are an "aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires" [4]. The fragmentation of the individual body into a repetitive, abstract pattern mirrors the fragmentation of the labor process under Taylorism and Fordism.

The task for a twenty-first-century cultural criticism is to identify the equivalent of the mass ornament in the age of the attention economy. What is the aesthetic reflex of a rationality based not on the mass production of standardized goods, but on the extraction and valorization of attention, data, and affect? This paper contends that the new mass ornament is the *serialized, on-demand, "prestige" television series* itself. It is a cultural form whose very structure—its complex, novelistic plotting, its demand for sustained attention across many hours, its encouragement of hermeneutic labor and fan engagement—mirrors the logic of the "cinematic mode of production" theorized by Jonathan Beller [6].

B. From Broadcast Factory to Platform Logic

The history of American television can be periodized as a shift from a "factory" model to a "platform" or "matrix" model. The broadcast era (roughly 1950s–1980s) was characterized by a small number of networks producing content for a mass, undifferentiated audience. The economic logic was one of scale: attract the largest possible viewership to sell to advertisers. The temporal structure was rigid and simultaneous: viewers watched the same program at the same time. This was the television equivalent of the Fordist assembly line, producing standardized cultural commodities for mass consumption.

The matrix era, by contrast, is defined by fragmentation, niche marketing, and the temporal dislocation of on-demand viewing. It is the era of "Peak TV," a term that itself reveals the underlying economic logic: a competitive frenzy of overproduction driven by the need for platforms (first cable networks, then streaming services) to differentiate themselves and capture subscriber revenue [15]. The key shift was the move from an advertising-based revenue model to a *subscription-based* model, pioneered by HBO. A subscription network does not need to appeal to the broadest possible audience; it needs to appeal to a *specific, affluent demographic* that will pay a premium for content that feels distinct, edgy, and culturally prestigious.

This is the economic foundation of the "prestige" drama. The series is designed not for passive, distracted viewing but for active, engaged consumption. It is a product meant to be analyzed, debated, and re-watched. It demands a form of "watching-labor" that far exceeds the couch-potato passivity of the broadcast era. The viewer is interpellated as an active participant in the construction of meaning, a hermeneutic worker whose engagement adds value to the commodity. This is the new mass ornament: not the synchronized bodies of dancers, but the synchronized *minds* of millions of viewers, each engaged in their own private act of interpretive labor, but collectively forming a vast, distributed pattern of attention and affect that is captured and valorized by the platforms.

C. Serialized Engagement as Labor

The formal complexity of the prestige drama is thus not an accident of artistic ambition. It is a functional requirement of the new economic model. A series that can be watched casually, with one's attention divided, does not generate the kind of intense, sustained engagement that justifies a subscription fee and drives the cultural conversation on social media. The very features that critics and fans celebrate—the intricate plotting, the moral ambiguity, the long-form character development—are also the features that make the series an efficient machine for the extraction of attentive labor.

The Gilligan universe is a paradigmatic case. The slowness that we identified in Section II as a formal resistance to the spectacle is, from the perspective of the industrial surface, a brilliant strategy for deepening viewer investment. The long takes, the silent stretches, the refusal of easy catharsis—these are not obstacles to enjoyment; they are the very source of the series' distinctive pleasure. They create a world that feels dense, real, and demanding of serious attention. The viewer who commits to *Better Call Saul* is not just consuming a product; they are undertaking a project. They are entering into a relationship with the work that spans years, that involves re-watching, discussing, and interpreting. This relationship is the raw material that the platform extracts and valorizes. The viewer's love for the series is the fuel that drives the attention economy.

V. The Central Dialectic: Critique as Commodity

The preceding sections have laid the necessary groundwork. Section II demonstrated that the Gilligan universe encodes a powerful immanent critique of the value-form into its narrative, formal, and symbolic structures. Section III argued that this critique alone cannot account for the series' popularity; it must be supplemented by an understanding of their resonance with the collective unconscious and the frustrations of late capitalism. Section IV updated Kracauer's method for the attention economy, showing how the industrial logic of prestige television transforms viewer engagement into a form of value-producing labor. This section now brings these threads together to articulate the central dialectic of the paper: *the critique of the value-form has itself become a primary source of value production*.

A. The Features of Critique as Features of Commodity

The features that make *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul* such incisive critiques of capitalism are not incidental to their commercial success. They are *constitutive* of it. This is the crucial point that a purely immanent or a purely sociological analysis misses. Consider the following table:

TABLE I
The Dialectical Identity of Critique and Commodity

Feature	As Critique	As Commodity
Slowness	Refuses spectacle's accelerated time; forces habitation of duration	Demands sustained attention; deepens viewer investment; signals "quality"
Opacity & Moral Ambiguity	Resists reification; refuses easy moral lessons; preserves human complexity	Generates hermeneutic labor; drives discussion and re-watching; creates fan engagement
Dense Symbolic Lore	Materializes abstractions of value-form; functions as conceptual hieroglyphs	Rewards close reading; fosters fan communities; extends engagement beyond viewing
Bleakness & Lack of Catharsis	Refuses consolations of spectacle; leaves viewer with unease and demand to think	Distinguishes brand from "feel-good" network TV; appeals to disillusioned demographic

The same formal slowness that resists the accelerated temporality of the spectacle is the slowness that signals to the discerning consumer that this is "serious" television, worth the investment of time and subscription fees. The same moral opacity that prevents characters from being reduced to marketable archetypes is the opacity that generates endless online debate, fan theories, and the kind of collective hermeneutic labor that keeps the series alive in the cultural conversation long after an episode has aired. The same dense symbolic lore that functions as a critique of the value-form also functions as a reward system for the attentive viewer, a set of Easter eggs and callbacks that deepen the sense of belonging to an interpretive community.

This is the central dialectic: *the critique of the commodity form has itself become a commodity form*. The system of late capitalism does not simply tolerate critique; it has developed a sophisticated apparatus for producing, packaging, and selling critique as a premium product. The "prestige" in prestige television is, in large measure, the prestige of appearing to be critical of the very system that produces it.

B. AMC and the Branding of Dissent

The institutional history of AMC, the network that originally aired *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*, provides a concrete case study in this dialectic. AMC's pivot to original programming in the mid-2000s was a calculated business strategy. The network, originally a home for classic films, faced a changing media landscape. To survive and grow, it needed to differentiate itself in an increasingly crowded cable marketplace. The solution was to cultivate a brand identity

centered on "quality," "authenticity," and a certain grittiness that stood in stark opposition to the perceived blandness of broadcast network television.

Mad Men (2007) and *Breaking Bad* (2008) were the twin pillars of this strategy. Their marketing emphasized their literary and cinematic qualities. They were not just TV shows; they were *art*. The critical acclaim they garnered was not a happy accident; it was a core component of the business model. Awards, think-pieces, and academic attention were not external to the commodity; they were part of its value. They signaled to potential subscribers and advertisers that AMC was a home for sophisticated, discerning content.

The contradiction is stark. A network whose business model depends on the valorization of attention and the sale of advertising time produced a series whose central theme is the corrosive, dehumanizing logic of valorization. The critique of the automatic subject was funded by, and in turn enriched, the automatic subject. This is not a case of a subversive message being co-opted after the fact. The subversion was the product all along. The critique was the commodity.

C. The Ambivalent Position of the Viewer

This dialectic also illuminates the ambivalent position of the viewer. The fan of *Breaking Bad* or *Better Call Saul* is engaged in a complex, contradictory activity. On one hand, they are participating in a genuine act of critical engagement. They are learning to see the logic of the value-form, to feel the weight of abstract time, to recognize the hollow promises of the American Dream. The series educates their desire, pushing it toward a dissatisfaction with the existing order.

On the other hand, this very engagement is the source of the series' value as a commodity. The viewer's attention, their emotional investment, their hermeneutic labor, their participation in online forums and fan communities—all of this is captured, quantified, and valorized by the platforms and networks. The viewer pays a subscription fee, watches advertisements, and generates data that is sold to third parties. Their critique is their labor, and the fruits of that labor are appropriated by the very system they are learning to critique.

This is the subjective experience of the dialectic. The viewer is neither a passive dupe nor a heroic resister. They are a participant in a process that simultaneously sharpens their critical faculties and enmeshes them more deeply in the circuits of valorization. The pleasure of watching *Better Call Saul* is a real pleasure, and the knowledge it produces is real knowledge. But that pleasure and that knowledge are produced within, and for, a system that is fundamentally hostile to their implications.

VI. The Figure of the Showrunner: Autonomy and Reification

No analysis of the prestige television phenomenon would be complete without an examination of the figure at its symbolic center: the showrunner-auteur. In the marketing and critical discourse surrounding series like *Breaking Bad*, the showrunner is elevated to the status of a singular creative visionary. Vince Gilligan is not just the head writer; he is the *author* of the Gilligan universe. His name functions as a brand, a guarantee of a certain kind of experience: morally complex, formally meticulous, darkly comic.

This section argues that the showrunner is the *embodiment* of the central dialectic of critique and commodification. He is a figure in whom the contradictory forces of creative autonomy and capitalist reification are most intensely concentrated.

A. The Showrunner as Auteur: A Space for Creative Autonomy

It is important not to dismiss the category of the auteur as mere ideology. The rise of the showrunner system in American television represents a genuine, if limited, expansion of creative autonomy. In the traditional, producer-driven model of broadcast television, writers were often interchangeable parts in a vast industrial machine. The showrunner model, pioneered by series like *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, centralizes creative control in the hands of a single visionary or a small team [16].

Vince Gilligan and his collaborator Peter Gould exercised an extraordinary degree of control over *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*. They oversaw every aspect of production, from the writers' room to the editing bay. The distinctive visual style, the meticulous pacing, the complex character arcs—all bear the imprint of a singular, coherent creative intelligence. This is a departure from the standardized, formulaic products of the culture industry as theorized by Adorno and Horkheimer. It is a space, however constrained, for the exercise of what Hegel would call Spirit—the human capacity for self-conscious, creative activity that is not wholly reducible to the logic of the market.

The showrunner, in this sense, is a figure of *freedom*. He is the one who, through talent, determination, and a measure of luck, has carved out a domain in which his creative will can shape the work. The best of these figures—Gilligan, David Chase, David Simon—have used this freedom to produce works of genuine complexity and critical power.

B. The Showrunner as Brand: The Reification of the Creator

Yet this freedom is purchased at a price. The showrunner is not only a creator; he is a *brand*. His name, his image, his public persona are all part of the commodity that is being sold. The marketing of *Breaking Bad* leaned heavily on the figure of Gilligan: the humble, thoughtful genius from Virginia, the man who had worked on *The X-Files* and now had created something even darker and more original. This persona is not a lie; Gilligan by all accounts is a genuinely thoughtful and humble person. But the *function* of this persona in the marketplace is to add value to the product. The name "Vince Gilligan" becomes a fetish, a magical token that obscures the collective, collaborative nature of the work and allows the series to circulate as a unique, authored commodity.

This is the process of reification. The living, creative activity of the showrunner—and, more importantly, the collective labor of the hundreds of writers, directors, actors, and crew members who actually make the series—is congealed into the singular, charismatic figure of the "creator." The showrunner becomes

a commodity himself, his image and reputation managed and deployed to generate subscriber loyalty and critical buzz. He is, in the terms of Wertkritik, a personification of the value-form.

C. The Tragic Position of the Showrunner-Spirit

The showrunner, then, occupies a tragic position. He is a figure of the Spirit in its alienated, self-conscious form. He knows the logic of the system. He has used that knowledge to create a space for genuine creative work. But the very success of that work transforms him into a reified image, a brand. His freedom is real, but it is exercised within a structure that ultimately subordinates it to the imperatives of capital.

Vince Gilligan's public statements often betray an awareness of this contradiction. He has spoken of his surprise and discomfort with the immense popularity of *Breaking Bad*, of his concern that some viewers were missing the point and glorifying Walter White. He has described the ending of the series as an attempt to make the consequences of Walt's actions unmistakably clear. These statements reveal a creator who is acutely aware that his work is being consumed in ways that may run counter to his intentions, and that his own position as a celebrated auteur is deeply ambivalent.

The showrunner is thus a Hegelian figure: the Spirit that has achieved self-consciousness, that knows itself as both free and unfree, both creator and commodity. He is not a hero who escapes the system, nor a villain who serves it. He is a symptom, a concentrated expression of the contradictions that define cultural production in late capitalism.

VII. Limits and Fractures: What Escapes Capture

The argument presented thus far may seem to tend toward a grim, totalizing conclusion. If the critique of the value-form is itself a commodity, if the showrunner's autonomy is a form of reification, if the viewer's engagement is a form of labor, then is there any outside? Is everything captured? This section addresses these questions directly, arguing that while the system of capture is powerful and pervasive, it is not total. There are residues, fractures, and lines of flight that prevent complete closure. Acknowledging these limits is essential for the credibility of the analysis and for the preservation of a space—however minimal—for genuine critique and transformation.

A. Jesse's Escape: The Ambiguous Line of Flight

The conclusion of *El Camino*, the film sequel to *Breaking Bad*, offers the most prominent image of escape in the Gilligan universe. Jesse Pinkman, having endured unimaginable suffering and enslavement, finally reaches Alaska. The final shot shows him driving through a snowy, empty landscape, a faint smile on his face. He is free.

But what kind of freedom is this? It is not a revolutionary freedom. It does not dismantle the system that enslaved him. It is a *personal* escape, a retreat from the game. Moreover, it is an escape that is entirely dependent on the services of Ed the "disappearer," a man who is himself a pure function of the market, selling new identities for a steep price. Jesse's freedom is purchased with the very drug money he spent years helping to produce. He has not transcended the value-form; he has simply used its proceeds to buy a ticket out.

And yet, there is a residue. The film ends at the moment of arrival. We do not see Jesse's life in Alaska. To show that life would be to show the value-form reasserting its grip: the need for a job, for documents, for social connections. By freezing the frame on the threshold, the film preserves the *possibility* of an outside. It offers an image, however fleeting and fragile, of a life not wholly determined by the automatic subject. This is not a resolution, but it is a refusal. It is a line of flight that, even if it leads only to a precarious, anonymous existence, points toward a desire that cannot be fully captured.

B. Kim's Withdrawal: The Negation Without Affirmation

Kim Wexler's fate in *Better Call Saul* is even more ambiguous. After the trauma of Howard Hamlin's death, she abandons her life in Albuquerque. She moves to Florida, takes a dull, undemanding job at a sprinkler company, and lives a life of excruciating ordinariness. She is not happy. She is not fulfilled. She has simply *stopped*. She has withdrawn her desire from the game of ambition, prestige, and transgression that defined her life with Jimmy.

Kim's withdrawal is a pure *negation*. It offers no positive vision of an alternative way of living. It is a living death, a self-imposed exile from the world of meaningful action. And yet, it is a *choice*. She has seen the logic of the game and has refused to continue playing. Her life in Florida is a monument to that refusal. In a system that demands constant activity, constant engagement, constant valorization, the act of stopping—of choosing a life of deliberate mediocrity—is a form of resistance, however bleak and however minimal. It is a fracture in the smooth surface of the spectacle, a silence that speaks of an exhaustion and a refusal that the system cannot fully metabolize.

C. The Irreducible Residue of Creative Labor

Finally, it is crucial to acknowledge that the labor of creating a series like *Better Call Saul* is not *entirely* reducible to its function as value-producing activity. The writers, directors, actors, and crew members who worked on the series were not simply cogs in a machine. They were skilled, passionate artists who took genuine pride in their work. The experience of creating something of beauty and complexity, of collaborating with talented colleagues, of pushing the boundaries of the medium—this experience has a qualitative dimension that exceeds its quantitative capture as labor-power.

This is not to romanticize creative work or to deny the very real pressures and exploitation that exist in the television industry. It is simply to insist that the process of valorization is never complete. There is always a *surplus*, a residue of meaning and experience that escapes the logic of the commodity. The joy of a perfectly composed shot, the satisfaction of a well-written line of dialogue, the camaraderie of a long day on set—these are forms of concrete, useful

activity that produce genuine use-values (beauty, meaning, community) alongside the exchange-values they generate for the network. It is in these residues, these moments of non-identical experience, that the possibility of a different mode of production—one oriented toward human flourishing rather than abstract accumulation—can be glimpsed.

D. The Theoretical Imperative: Against Totalization

Acknowledging these limits is not a retreat from the central argument. It is a necessary theoretical and political gesture. A critique that claims to explain everything, that sees only capture and commodification everywhere, becomes a form of mirror-image of the system it critiques. It reproduces the logic of totalization and leaves no space for agency or transformation. The task of a dialectical criticism is to hold both moments in tension: the pervasive, structuring power of the value-form, and the stubborn, persistent residues that escape its grasp. The Gilligan universe, in its ambiguous endings and its irreducible complexities, is a privileged site for thinking this tension. It shows us a world that is thoroughly colonized by the automatic subject, but it also shows us Jesse's smile, Kim's withdrawal, and the quiet dignity of Nacho's sacrifice. These are not solutions, but they are signals. They are the faint, flickering lights that remind us that the circle is not entirely closed, that the spiral may yet ascend.

VIII. Conclusion: Toward a New Critical Method

This paper has traced a complex, dialectical path through the Gilligan universe and the industrial conditions that produced it. It began with a paradox: how do works of such profound critical insight achieve such massive commercial success? It answered by arguing that prestige television represents the first cultural form in which the critique of the value-form becomes itself a primary source of value production. The features that make *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul* incisive critiques—slowness, opacity, moral ambiguity, dense symbolic lore—are the very same features that make them valuable commodities in the matrix-era attention economy.

This argument required a multi-layered approach. We performed an immanent analysis of the series' narrative, formal, and symbolic dimensions, demonstrating how they encode the logic of the value-form. We turned to Jungian and Deleuzo-Guattarian frameworks to account for the collective unconscious resonance that transforms critique into phenomenon. We updated Kracauer's method of surface-level analysis for the age of the attention economy, reading the industrial logic of cable and streaming as a new mass ornament. We examined the ambivalent figure of the showrunner-auteur, the tragic embodiment of the dialectic of autonomy and reification. And we acknowledged the limits of capture, identifying the residues and lines of flight that prevent total closure.

A. Toward an Updated Kracauerian Practice

The methodological implication of this study is clear. A critical cultural studies adequate to the twenty-first century must learn to read on multiple levels simultaneously. It must attend to the immanent content of the work—its narrative, its form, its symbolic structures. It must attend to the industrial surface—the business models, the technological platforms, the labor processes. And it must attend to the dimension of spectatorship—the collective unconscious, the flows of desire, the ambivalent experience of engagement. These are not separate domains. They are moments of a single, unified expressive surface, the surface of the Spirit in its late-capitalist formation.

This is the legacy of Siegfried Kracauer, updated for our time. Kracauer taught us to read the mass ornament, the seemingly trivial patterns of popular culture, as disclosures of the deep structure of the social order. The mass ornament of our time is the prestige television series, a form in which the most sophisticated critiques of the system are generated from within the system's own logic of valorization. To read this ornament critically is to trace the intricate, dialectical relationship between critique and commodity, between the desire for an outside and the machinery of capture.

B. The Task of Criticism

The task of criticism, in this context, is not to offer easy answers or to provide a program for escape. It is to *clarify* the conditions of our entanglement. It is to show, with as much precision and honesty as possible, how the system works, how it captures even our most critical impulses, and where the fractures and residues might be found. This is a modest task, but it is not a powerless one. The very act of understanding the dialectic—of seeing how critique is commodified—is a step toward loosening its grip. It is a form of what Hegel called *Aufhebung*: a negation that preserves and elevates. We cannot simply step outside the value-form. But we can learn to see it, to name it, and to recognize the moments when it falters.

The Gilligan universe, in its unrelenting bleakness and its stubborn glimmers of hope, is a gift to this kind of criticism. It provides a rich, complex, and deeply symptomatic object for analysis. It shows us the automatic subject in all its terrible beauty. And it shows us Jesse Pinkman, driving through the snow, smiling faintly, heading toward a future we cannot see. The road is open. The spiral has not stopped turning. The light, perhaps, is still winning.

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